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Voting and Registration Highlights From the Current Population Survey: 1964 to 1980

This report summarizes Current Population Survey results on voting and registration in the 1964-80 Presidential election years and identifies the principal trends in voter behavior during those years. More detailed information on the social and economic characteristics of voters and nonvoters in each of the election years are published in the Current Population Reports, Series P-20 (Nos. 143, 192, 253, 322, and 370).

TRENDS IN VOTER TURNOUT

Voter turnout, which began falling around the mid-1960's, reached its lowest level in the Presidential election of 1976. Since that year, turnout in Presidential elections has remained at about 59 percent.

Between 1964 and 1980, 34 million persons 18 to 44 years old were added to the voting-age population: about 12 million because of the lowering of the voting age to 18 in all States, and the remainder because of the maturing of the large baby-boom cohorts. This large influx of young people, with their traditionally low voting rates, contributed significantly to lowering overall voter turnout over the past two decades.

Although voter turnout declined for most population groups between 1964 and 1976, the rate of decline was uneven.

- In the North and West Regions combined, the voting rate declined by 14 percentage points, from 75 percent in 1964 to 61 percent in 1980.
- In the South, where the voting rate has traditionally been much lower than in other regions, there was no evidence of a difference in voting rates in the 1964 and 1980 elections.
- In the combined North and West Regions, Black turnout dropped 19 percentage points during the period, from 72 percent in 1964 to 53 percent in 1980.
- Black turnout rates in the South, in marked contrast to rates for all other groups in the remainder of the Nation, rose during the two decades, from 44 percent in 1964 to 48 percent in 1980.

SEX DIFFERENCES IN VOTER TURNOUT

The decline in turnout since 1964 was greater for men (from 72 percent in 1964 to 59 percent in 1980) than for women (from 67 percent to 59 percent) which equalized the overall turnout rates for both sexes in 1980.

Among persons 18 to 44 years old, the turnout rate for men and women equalized in the 1972 Presidential election at about 58 percent. In subsequent elections, the rate for these women exceeded that of their male counterparts: 54 percent versus 52 percent in 1976 and 54 percent versus 51 percent in 1980.

Over the past two decades, the difference in voting rates between men and women 45 years old and over dropped by half. In 1964, men 45 years and over voted at a rate of 77 percent, while women of this age voted at a rate of 69 percent. In 1980, the corresponding rates were 70 percent for men 45 years and over and 66 percent for women.

Black women have had higher voting rates than Black men since 1976. In 1980, the voting rate for Black women was 53 percent, while the rate for Black men was 47 percent.

SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC CHARACTERISTICS

Educational attainment is directly related to the likelihood of voting. In the 1980 Presidential election, only 43 percent of persons whose formal schooling did not go beyond elementary school reported having voted, compared with 80 percent of college graduates; in 1964, voting rates for these two educational groups were 59 percent and 88 percent, respectively. These data indicate that voter turnout dropped more severely for persons with lower educational levels than it did for those with higher educational levels.

Labor force behavior and employment status are also highly related to the likelihood of voting. In 1980, 60 percent of persons in the labor force reported having voted; 62 percent of those employed and 41 percent of those unemployed reported having voted. Among those not in the labor force, 57 percent reported having voted in 1980. Between 1964 and 1980, turnout among employed persons dropped 11 percentage points, from 73 percent to 62 percent, while the rate

for unemployed persons dropped 17 points, from 58 percent in 1964 to 41 percent in 1980. For those not in the labor force, voter turnout dropped 8 percentage points from 65 percent in 1964 to 57 percent in 1980.

TRENDS IN REGISTRATION

Registration rates have declined over the 1968-80 period in a manner parallel to that of voting rates.

- In 1968, the first year registration data were available from the Current Population Survey, 74 percent of the voting-age population reported having registered; in 1980, 67 percent reported having registered.
- For men, the decline in registration was around 9 percentage points, from 76 percent in 1968 to 67 percent in 1980; for women, the decline was about 6 percentage points from 73 percent in 1968 to 67 percent in 1980.

One clear-cut finding of the data is that once people register, they overwhelmingly go to the polls and vote. Unlike the overall voting rate, which declined 10 percentage points between 1964 and 1980, turnout among persons who were registered declined slightly from 91 percent in 1968 to 89 percent in 1976 and 1980.

- Nationally and in the combined North and West Regions, turnout among registered persons dropped about 3 percentage points between 1968 and 1980 for the total population and for both Whites and Blacks.
- In the South, voter turnout among persons registered declined sharply between 1968 and 1972 from 87 to 81 percent, but subsequently rose to 86 percent in 1980. A similar pattern of decrease and increase occurred for both Whites and Blacks during this period.

FUTURE TRENDS IN THE VOTING-AGE POPULATION

Between 1984 and the year 2000, the voting-age population of the United States is projected to increase by 26.8 million persons (15 percent). As a result of the gradual aging of the population, the high turnout group of persons 45 years old and over will increase by 23.3 million.

- As a further consequence of the aging of the electorate, the proportion of the total voting-age population 45 years and over will rise from 42 percent in 1984 to 48 percent in 2000.
- Between 1984 and 2000, the Black population of voting age will increase by 28 percent, more than twice the projected increase for Whites (12 percent).

RELIABILITY OF ESTIMATED STATISTICS

The voting and registration data shown in this report were collected approximately 2 weeks after each election in the November supplements to the Current Population Survey for each of the respective Presidential election years. The data represent reported voting and registration of persons in the survey and as such are subject to sampling variability as well as misreporting. Previous studies show that estimates of voter turnout from the CPS have exceeded official ballot counts in past Presidential elections. It is not known, however, the relative degree of this bias among different population groups shown in this report. The reader should be cautious in interpreting small differences in the percentages reported voting and registering in the different election years. Some of the factors accounting for differences between official election returns and the CPS are discussed in the report, *Voting and Registration in the Election of November 1982*, Current Population Reports, Series P-20, No. 383.